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Reconstructive-Memory Process

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Reconstructive-Memory Process

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2012

Dedication

For my mother, Jun Og Kim and my father, Bang Min Shin

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledgement Professor Leslie Mutchler for supporting me to see myself in a positive way. I would also like to thank Professor Mark Goodman, Beili Liu, Don Harron, Jeff Williams, and Janet Kastner for their heartfelt advice and thoughtful concerns over the past three years.

Abstract

Reconstructive-Memory Process

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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This graduate report is a description of my artistic development through the graduate program at the University of Texas at Austin. It records my development and growth as an artist in relationship to the concepts, materials, and processes I have been investigating and exploring in the past three years.

The graduate report focuses on three important concerns to which I've been dedicated. First, materials are imperative to my work. I physically collect and use my father's ordinary objects and transform them with raw materials, such as clay, flour, honey, chocolate, beeswax, and petroleum jelly. The decision of choosing raw materials is based on my personal and cultural experiences. I am particularly interested in exploiting raw materials because I believe these raw materials can trigger a particular memory, place, or relationship that I want to preserve and remember.

Second, my process of making involves ritualistic aspects with repetitive acts. I believe that everyday practices are a way of reconstructing relationships and remembering home. I am interested in embracing emotional attributes that may be simple

activities: spraying a piece daily to keep it wet or sewing a personal object until it is impossible to sew.

Finally, through the relationship among the objects, repeated actions, and an anticipation that evokes magical power and charged energy, I methodically transform objects. I do this to celebrate emotions and to preserve not only these personal objects but also my memories of home.

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Reconstructive-Memory Process

Living alone in a foreign country pushes me want to recreate relationships in my artwork that I had with my family at home in South Korea. Consequently, the origin of my sculptural work, thus far, has been very personal. Through this reconstructive – memory process, I dig up buried recollections, leaving me with a desire to know, understand and metaphorically represent my present situation in a deeper way.

As the elements of earth, water, and air affect each other and work together to document processes and bring about results, the change I have undergone while living in a foreign country has become an important motif in my work. These changes are commonly viewed as solutions, but also contain properties and pathways for each other's dissolution. I've discovered three important concerns through my research. First, I mainly work with raw materials: clay, flour, honey, chocolate, beeswax, and petroleum jelly. My work is perishable, ephemeral, and impermanent. Second, my practice has involved constant physical activity, extensive craftsmanship, and personal rituals. The work is a record of transformation and documentation through material processes. Lastly, I have been studying my father to know and understand him better, wishing I could decrease the distance that I feel between him and me. By engaging both the notions of "lost" and "care," I take control of loss through caring, and ultimately in the end, confront that which is lost. The work becomes a history of life within an unpredictable process. The history of life involves investigating containment, the repression of desire, and the need to preserve. I make artwork from within an emotive place.

There are three contemporary artists that currently interest me: Wolfgang Laib, Janine Antoni, and Louise Bourgeois. Their materials are rich in metaphor, and the works represent ritual, repetitive arts, and emotional attributes. Their form and content

presupposes that processes of making are inseparable from the meaning of the art. Such work emerges from the studio fully realized and self-sustaining. I am interested in Laib's studio practice that involves silence and solitude, and the idea that the work stresses the importance of being part of a larger collective whole. His use of specific substances reflects a commitment to nature and to ritual as a form of spiritual serenity and chivalry. For example, spending months to harvest pollen each spring and pouring milk to change the pristine surface of each *Milkstone* piece everyday represent ritual. Antoni's work emphasizes highly specific materials as part of an intense and often extended encounter between her own body and a particular set of circumstances. Her process art places emphasis on repetitive action, and reveals forms of the female body, or performance art through the issues raised by the materials and her action on them. In her work, the transition becomes significant. A work's initial state transitions through persistent preservation, it brings together and correlates material as part of its meaning. Her process indicates that it is an inextricable connection between documentation and the work. For ephemeral and perishable works, preservation is challenging to maintain the definition of original work because the impermanent materials and their transforming processes and outcomes affect the initial definition of work. Louise Bourgeois' work is wholly autobiographical, based on her childhood memories created from constantly looking back to the past. Her abstract sculptures are deeply representative and anthropomorphic, continually referencing and remaking female and male bodies; they are based on her relationship with her parents and the role sexuality played in her early family life. This is the vocabulary she understands and uses to remake that family story. Her artwork is charged with sexuality and innocence, and the interplay between the two.

I often use clay because it is a natural substance that is both fragile and vulnerable when it is dry, but malleable and sensual when it is wet. I incorporate other raw materials,

such as honey, flour, petroleum jelly, soap base, beeswax, and chocolate to compliment and begin a visual dialogue with the clay pieces. Life is deeply related to food, which is grown in earth and water. These raw materials can trigger a particular memory, place, or relationship. For example, based on my personal and cultural experiences, honey has historic usage as a source for sweetening tea, preserving food, and medical purposes. Soap signifies cleanliness and is deeply involved with the body and water. Vaseline is used as a healing solution; chocolate is given as a reward; and dough is made into sweets for celebratory occasions. They are all the basis of my memory of home. Also, I use these materials as a tool for recreating a specific experience, entropic rituals, and spiritual activity. In my work, Vaseline is used as a substance for preserving important personal objects, such as embalmed sculptures (Plate 1). Honey is used to preserve shoes by creating a sculpture in the air that activates the sense of smell (Plate 2). Blocks of soap made with the honey focuses on the potential for cleansing and maintaining body and mind (Plate 3). Dough in pockets starts to grow and creates heat and water vapor, charging and celebrating the object with new life (Plate 5).

These materials provide me with the opportunity to experiment and make unexpected discoveries. All the materials are composed of an infinite number of uniform particles, fused together into a homogeneous whole. They are living substances, which participate in the ongoing organic process of growth and decay. The perishable and ephemeral materials I employ indicate impermanence. Clay, dough, soap, and honey are gradually changing: their existence is familiar yet unfamiliar; the subtle slow transformations barely capture my attention, yet, wholly transform the work. For instance, dough expands covertly, and it creates heat and water vapor. Honey crystallizes as time passes, and blocks of soap glitter and sweat when the humidity level is high. Clay sweats, rots, and molds when the temperature stays warm and humid, then eventually

dries and breaks. Through daily activities, I try to maintain control and keep everything preserved, but nevertheless clay breaks; it evaporates; it melts. But briefly, like a memory, it all does exist. I harness these processes into forms that activate the viewer's sense of smell and touch, emotion and cognition. I allow and fetishize the moment that the materials generate associations with the forms into which they are shaped and establish the subject or content of the work.

My process of making involves ritualistic aspects with repetitive acts. I am interested in embracing emotional attributes that may be simple activities: spraying a piece daily to keep it wet, sewing a personal object until it is impossible to sew, or producing twenty four blocks of honey soap everyday. Everyday practices are a way of reconstructing relationships and remembering home. For instance, I preserve shoes in honey, and I have been producing blocks of soap everyday with honey until it is gone, and the shoes are completely revealed (Plate 4). Covering my grandfather's shirt completely with gold thread, obsessively sewing a linear pattern into the weave of the shirt, is in my mind a reverent and ritualistic activity that brings me closer to his memory (Plate 6). In the same manner, transforming a man's tank top into a tiny, delicate, and feminine top, in some way very humorous, requires meticulous and tedious practice and concentration (Plate 7). I have also been folding personal objects in specific and repetitive ways, casting them in clay (a process which burns and destroys the objects), and keeping only the remnants or ash. Some of the remains I glaze and paint gold, while others I allow to remain white in color (Plate 8). The coloring distinguishes the objects that belong to my father from the objects that I have acquired from a thrift store. I have started to incorporate objects based on ideas of the father figure, instead of relying on my father's actual objects. From these thrift store additions, I realize that I treat objects from an unfamiliar person quite differently; I take more cautious care with them than I take

when working with my father's belongings. For instance, I store those objects into a plastic bag, ignoring them for days instead of hanging them up and studying them everyday. At times, I am hesitant to work with them, even though the process of art making is exactly the same, apart from the coloring. That is why I glaze some of the objects gold and allow some of the objects to remain white without color, to show my distinctive attitudes and behavior toward the two different sources.

Also, an important characteristic consists of my constant physical activity, labor and time, the very process of making – that which is hidden and invested within each object. It becomes the imperative and significant part of my work. For instance, to make a clay space stay wet, I must check it everyday, cover it with plastic, keep a vaporizer on, and spray it with an adequate amount of water. The process of creating a huge, wet clay space to allow for a kinesthetic response requires hours of labor (Plates 10 and 11). Transforming a hand towel becomes an act in which I sew layers and layers of thread for countless hours until the needle is broken (Plate 9). In the same way, sewing to cover a shirt completely with gold thread and feminizing a man's tank top require continuous labor and time (Plate 6 and 7). The labor and set time that is involved in the process of making becomes a daily ritualistic routine. The relationship among the objects, repeated actions, and anticipation evokes magical power and a charged energy that is ironic. I methodically transform objects to celebrate emotional value, to preserve not only objects but also my memories and relationships.

As I've been working with ideas of memory and the permanence or impermanence of objects, the notion of fetish has become an issue in my work. The definition of fetish is broad, but based on my research, I define a fetish as spending an enormous amount of time doing or thinking about one particular thing; the act of getting sexual pleasure from a particular object; or an object that some people worship for its

magical powers. I see that there is some kind of connection between the idea of fetish and my work. For example, I cast worn out socks, long johns, shirts, and hand towels, which belong to my father, in clay and glaze them with gold, allowing them to exhibit their own power (Plate 8). I fixate time and labor on a particular object: the ritualistic and repetitive processes used in making “*Honey Shoes*” and “*Towel*” (Plate 2 and 9). Perhaps, my activity could be viewed as a spiritual ritual and obsessive attention. Through using real objects and raw materials, my work is viewed as divining a person (specifically my father) through the adoration of his belongings.

The reason I collect and use my father’s ordinary objects is that I believe they quantitatively provide for the history and authenticity of my father. Objects not only connect to biography but also constitute the notion of the individual life. First, I want to perceive my father from the outside, as a singular and authentic context that the objects trace. Then I want to keep track of the silence of ordinary life through the objects binding me to home, memory, and relationships. Through experiencing signs of the everyday, I expect that I can articulate my father better, reduce our differences, and find similarities. Susan Stewart says, “the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object, a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance.”¹ I want to obtain the process and specific existences of objects saturated with meanings that might never be fully revealed to me. Stewart also mentions capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience that is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. She says, “this souvenir domesticates the grotesque on the level of content, subsuming the sexual facts to the cultural code. But the souvenir also domesticates on the level of its operation: external experience is internalized; the best is taken home.”² Based

¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Duke University: Durham and London, 1993), 133.

² Stewart, 134.

on her writing, and object survives, because it marks the transference of origin to trace, moving from event to memory and desire. Objects distinguish experiences. As I desire objects of my experiences that are reportable, in a material way through transformation, I create meaning. She says, “the souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia.”³

Personally, a strong emotion takes possession of me always at the beginning stage of my art making; however, at the end point, I confront the fact that my intention fails. The main purpose of my work is to know and understand my father better, wishing I could decrease the distance (both physical and emotional) between him and me. My process of understanding begins when collecting his belongings, hanging them up, and studying them everyday. Later, I bind them with raw materials, and a ritualistic process, expecting a miracle. However, my work relies on using his actual belongs, that indicate his body, not a sense of his values or what is important to him. It is because of this that my emotional response to the result of each piece is disappointment and failure. Through art making, I realize that it is impossible to know my father better and achieve a closer relationship with him. I am acutely aware of the difficulties I face: as I know relatively little about my father, and no amount of attention paid to his belongings or his memory can close that gap.

I want to continue to transform objects through their relationships to materials, the very process of making, and an anticipation that evokes magical power and charged energy. I will continue to create new artworks that resonate with the juxtaposition of objects, materials, and actions that share and evoke my emotions and experiences of

³ Stewart, 135.

home and longing, tradition, and surprise. My artwork is on the threshold of realizing my dreams, representing and being accessible to diverse audiences from two distinct worlds (East and West) that I find myself living in, educated by, and constantly reflecting. From common and magical materials taken from the earth, I fashion objects with love that evoke what we feel, but cannot always see.

Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

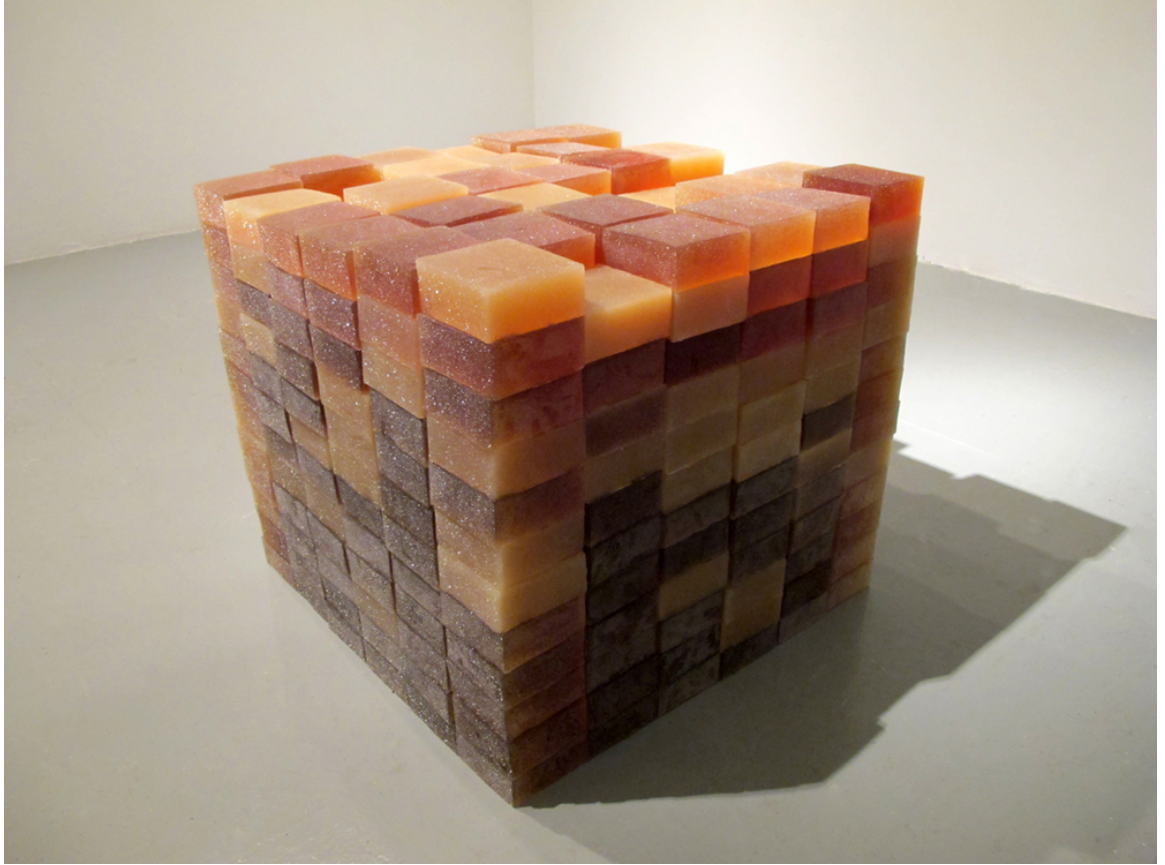


Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate 11



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Stewart, Susan. *On Longing*. Duke University: Durham and London. 1993.